'Is Liberalism Dead?'
The Hartford Courant (1923-1990); Apr 22, 1980; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant
pg. 14

'Is Liberalism Dead?'

The recondite exercise of identifying liberal, conservative, neo-conservative and moderate political candidates has become unsatisfying, for the labels have become shields behind which to hide, rather than aids to ideological persuasion.

The shorthand by which political identification is analyzed, from left to right, is riddled with ambiguity and misconceptions, but the system persists, for the voters seek comfort in the clarity promised by such labels.

Whatever the looseness of the nomenclature, the class of creature known as liberal is thought to be in decline. The unofficial toteboard of issues has registered a covey of other-than-liberal victories of late, and the number of politicians moved to embrace the liberal label appears to be shrinking. Conditions have become serious enough to prompt liberal Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to ask, in a New York Times magazine article, "Is Liberalism Dead?"

Liberalism, in a 1980s, narrow, American understanding of the word, is still quite alive, yet it can stand accused of teetering on the edge of a coffin — built by liberal hands. The obituary for liberalism has been formed with the words of the supposed corpse — words of retreat, fear, overcautiousness, and imprecision.

When Sen. Edward M. Kennedy began his presidential campaign, the message was not that of a liberal alternative to an increasingly conservative incumbent, but of a "leader," a non-ideological charismatic figure. The strategy was dismal, as were Mr. Kennedy's early primary results. Of late, he has emerged, for better or worse, as a man of liberal ideals, and the voters have responded.

Sen. Frank Church, the liberal statesman from conservative Idaho, began running scared months ago, in preparation for his re-election bid. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he parlayed the non-issue of Soviet troops in Cuba into an international incident, followed closely by a barrage of anti-gun control rhetoric designed to please the folks back home. Of late, Mr. Church has reassessed his image. Last Sunday, he spoke most wisely and calmly of the situation in Iran, and the continued hope that the hostages' release can be won through patient diplomacy.

A colleague, liberal survivor George S. McGovern in South Dakota, is still choosing to seek out a conservative niche, as he comes up for re-election in November. From the man who made anti-war rhetoric a national political platform, comes the suggestion of a naval blockade of Iran.

The nation will not be a better place, if liberals somehow succeed in rounding their edges, or clouding their identity. The general economic strength of America, combined with a two-party system that moderates the ideological passions of liberals and conservatives alike, usually encourages the status quo in public policy. The "liberals," those whose passions for progressive change commit them to government activism, provide a healthy spur to societal complacency.

A year in which the federal budget may be bludgeoned into balance, a year in which conservative economic theory may be given sympathetic airing, a year in which the simple pieties of Ronald Reagan may receive unexpected support, is not a year in which to declare liberalism dead and gone. The causes and commitments that have come to be identified as liberal are no less compelling in 1980 than they have been for decades. Those concerns may, at the moment, rest below the political surface, but they will re-emerge, in time, for they represent some resilient truths.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.